History of the Program

During the World War II program, all the contracting was done in Mexico City, men came there from all over the country to try to get a contract; those who succeeded were transported to the United States in special trains. The routine was that, first of all, you had to have a bath before you could go any farther in the contracting process; so what most of us did who were not living in Mexico City, was to go to a public bath and we would get a check proving that we had actually taken a bath, and this we took back with us to the contracting center. Then the next thing was that we received a physical examination, it was very thorough and strict; there were two or three doctors working full time checking the men. People who had venereal disease or anything like that were rejected immediately. While we were receiving the physical exams they would take our clothes into a steamroom and disinfect them by steaming them, this led to all sorts of funny situations because the clothes frequently got mixed up. Then we were asked questions on our work experience, and we were given a security check and if we passed all these things, then we could get onto the train.

History of the Program
Jose Solas
July 24, 1957

These trains make up quite a story in themselves, as you may know transportation was highly uncertain during the war years and this was even more true in Mexico than it was in the United States. Often the trains would be run off onto a spur somewhere between Mexico City and the border, and would just wait there for two or three days; they never told us why. Such things led to a certain amount of hardship, since when the trains left Mexico City they were only supplied with a limited amount of food and water and so forth. When I first came up, this happened and it almost led to a very unfortunate situation. The men got quite unhappy and began grumbling among themselves; and it turned out that the man in charge of this particular shipment of braceros, a representative of the United States Government, didn't speak a word of Spanish. So, he would come aroung from car to car and try to tell the men what was going on and reason with them, and ask them to be patient; but none of them could understand a word he was saying. So, I went up to him after awhile and I said to him, "May I be of assistance, sir?", he nearly through his arms around me right there on the spot he was so glad to see somebody who spoke both English and Spanish.

Back in the World War II days of the Bracero Program, the health of the men was handled differently than it is now. For example, if venereal disease shows up in the camp now, the doctor who comes out here to the camp everyday takes care of it; but, in those days if venereal disease showed up we took the man into the County Health Department and they took care of him.